



Order Out of Chaos: The Incident Command System

By Lieutenant Colonel Richard D. Howe

It is vital that the U.S. Army learn, adopt, and institute the Incident Command System (ICS).

Today's Army lives by the military decisionmaking process (MDMP). The MDMP begets our troop-leading procedures and our warning and operation order products. This proven process provides the format for coordinating operational activities. The MDMP works fine for deliberate operations that are driven from the top down and for hasty operations that are conducted in a deliberate manner.

The ICS represents the "other side of the coin." Whereas the deliberate MDMP is driven from the top down, the ICS (which is generally reactive by nature) is driven from the bottom up. There is a specific ICS language and process that, while not foreign to the military mind, requires its own degree of study and practice to be applied effectively.

The Army leaders of today must manage, plan, and execute operations in both directions—perhaps even simultaneously—based on the needs of the moment. To do this, they must be educated in the MDMP and ICS. This results in more capable, adaptive leaders who can change mental gears when required.

The ICS is used to achieve order from chaos. Unlike the MDMP, which provides guidance based on certain assumptions and desires, the ICS fills the gap between the execution of a battle drill or fragmentary order and the next major event, such as an operation order. In a reactive situation at the tactical or operational level, the ICS can help develop a battlefield situation and more efficiently synchronize the application of combat power against the enemy.

The ICS is a proven process; it has been used in the public safety arena for more than thirty years. It is also mandated for use as the underpinning of the National Incident Management System.¹

The ICS empowers junior leaders. It is infinitely flexible, and it task-organizes as a situation develops. The ICS is efficient

because the only organizational functions developed are those that arise from a need. At the conclusion of an incident, participants return to their normal command relationships within their organizations. In the MDMP, nonorganic assets become full players only after task organization and coordination occur. One of the strengths of the ICS is that the infusion of nonorganic participants into the unified team effort is expected. The ICS never misses a beat in scooping up these assets and employing them on the fly.


The most fundamental concept of the ICS is that the incident commander (IC) can be trusted, within limits, to describe the situation and needs and everyone available is at the disposal of the IC upon request. Only when the IC is overwhelmed by the magnitude of the incident is command passed back to the next level or to another appropriate agency. All agencies participate in the true spirit of teamwork; after all, they just might be appointed as the IC the next time.

The ICS is an interagency process at its very best. If interagency challenges exist, two ICS-managed exercises can be conducted and command of the incidents can be rotated between the two agencies that are failing to work well together. This is how Army leaders are traditionally built and developed. It works.

The ICS is not just an American phenomenon; it is an international success within the public safety arena. It can be applied in a joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational environment using doctrinal material that has already been translated.

As a career Army officer and a former career professional firefighter, I have seen the MDMP and ICS work in developed operational environments. Each offers strengths and weaknesses. Together, they result in more capable Army leaders of the future.

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This event was the first of many planned, combined training efforts between U.S. CBRN and EOD Soldiers and their Iraqi Chemical Defense Section counterparts. MNF-I and the U.S. Army CBRN School will continue to strengthen the established bond and develop the capabilities of the Iraqi Chemical Corps and associated school, reducing the threat of weapons of mass destruction in the region and furthering stability efforts throughout Iraq. 

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Slowly but surely, nearly all U.S. Government agencies that participate in "incident" responses are coming onboard with the language and process of the ICS as the method of managing interagency responses, including cases of deliberate operations that are not "emergencies." Therefore, fluency in the ICS is required not only for its potential tactical use in combat, but also for full Army participation in future multiagency incident responses.

Online ICS training is available at <http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/>. For more information about the ICS, go to http://www.fema.gov/txt/nims/nims_ics_position_paper.txt. 

Endnote:

¹Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 (HSPD-5), *Management of Domestic Incidents*, 28 February 2003.

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